

BLIND SPOT
a novel
DRAFT
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WORD COUNT: 93,792

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PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

It started with a letter and a car crash. That seems almost too perfect, but that's how it happened. The letter was from my father, who I had not heard from in twenty-one years, and the car crash, fatal, was witnessed by a workmate of mine. I got the letter on the Tuesday, and three days later, Jean saw the crash.

Jean came bounding into work that morning, recounting his story even before he got through the door. He was shaken, true, but there was something reverential about his tone, as if he felt honoured to be the universe's first chosen beholder of these deaths. The rest of the staff quickly granted the young student chef the respect that comes with such marks of distinction. And though Vivianne snapped at everyone to get back to work, even she drifted over to his workstation, where he was chopping herbs early in the shift, and asked, "What did it look like?"

Jean's young, eager eyes sparkled as he told his story over and over that day, clicking his tongue, and shaking his head in real or stage distress at the tragedy. It was incredible, he said. Just incredible. The blood, the bone fragments. The damage done to a human body.

The sound of the crash had woken him at 7:12 a.m., and he rushed out of his Villray apartment into the street, wearing only a pair of sweatpants and a t-shirt, despite the cool of the October morning. He expected survivors, he said, and took his cell phone with him, dialing 911 on the way down the stairs. The little red car had smashed head-on

into poorly-placed concrete divider, and as he rushed towards the steaming metal, Jean lost hope of finding anyone alive. The damage done to the automobile was frightening, and he braced himself for the carnage he would find inside.

"Have you ever seen a really bad car accident?" he asked me later that night, as the two of us finished the last of the evening's mop-up before heading home. "I mean close up, I mean with the bodies, I mean before it gets cleaned? Have you ever seen what actually happens to people?" He wasn't interested in my answer to that question, and he pushed on with this uncomfortable mix of glee and horror, giving me a host of details I didn't want to hear. The smashed windshield, jutting bits of metal, and descriptions of blood and bodies, the angle of one of the victim's arms. "Pointing in all the wrong directions," Jean said. "It was so weird." He rested his chin on his mop, somber and somehow pitying my lack of knowledge of the world. "You have no idea, Oscar," he said, and the lights glinted off the shining tile of the floor, "how terrible it really is. How really terrible when you see it up close like that. These were people talking and breathing and all of a sudden they're gone. I'm not religious," he continued, cleaning again as he spoke, paying close attention to the floor, moving the mop in slow figure eights, the cleansing symbols of infinity, over and over in front of him. "But it's scary seeing a body moments after the soul disappears. You have no idea."

I did have an idea but instead of saying so, I just nodded.

Jean spotted some sort of caked-on substance—a red sauce or dried blood--on the side of a stainless steel counter, and he knelt down to scrub it off. Vivianne was a demanding queen of her kitchen. Jean was a conscientious apprentice.

"And a driving student," he continued, with a little gallows laugh, staring intently at whatever he was scrubbing as he spoke. "How's that for irony?"

There were two dead in the car: an instructor from the Driving Ace Academy, and his charge. Their lesson, officials from Ace Academy confirmed, had started at 7:00 am, and ended, earlier than expected, at 7:12 am.

Jean offered to drive me home, but I refused, perhaps too curtly. I did not know Jean well, and he may have been offended, but I couldn't bear more of his gory descriptions, with their vaguely pornographic details and the excitement with which he related them.

"I prefer walking," I said, which was true. I never accepted such offers anyway. I hated cars, everything about them, their fenders and bumpers, their rubber, the horn honking, the aggressive headlights, that smell they exude when new, the more personalized smell they acquire when old, the gas, the gadgets, I hated it all. I always felt constrained in a car, as if I were imprisoned in a high-speed execution chamber, or a missile of death. I did not drive, did not own, or want, a car, and I had not been in an automobile in well over a year. Jean's tales of death and destruction had not increased my esteem for the metal monsters.

And more than all that, since I received the letter from my father, I had been mulling over one of the biggest decisions of my life. I do all my best thinking when I walk.

We finished our cleaning, and we stepped out the staff door into the pungent alleyway at the back of the kitchen, the door locking behind us.

"God, it stinks back here," Jean said. He was not yet acclimatized to life in a professional kitchen.

I agreed, and told him he'd get used to it. He asked me again whether I wanted a lift, and again I shook my head and refused. "I really prefer walking," I said. "I always walk home."

This seemed to satisfy Jean. We waved goodbye, and set off in opposite directions.

I appreciated Jean's offer, but it did seem unfair that he would subject me to such horror stories all day when I had this decision hanging over my head. Maybe it was some kind of cosmic warning; or maybe just a test of my will.

When I got the letter, I had decided to learn to drive. And now I had to choose a driving school.

Driving Ace Academy was now stricken from my list.

The letter from my father came two weeks after my twenty-sixth birthday, and I had gathered it with a bunch of other mail from my aluminum mailbox in the entrance to my building, without realizing what it was. It was mixed in with flyers from two cable companies offering deals with ambiguous pricing schemes, and yet another request that I join the Canadian Conservative Youth Party Alliance (*Dear friend: Do you like high taxes? Do you like government waste? Do you like welfare cheats? ...*) I suspected my godfather Horace Fry, who had raised me and should have known better, had put me on

the CCYPA mailing list, as he had with the Global Association for the Defence of Free Enterprise, and the Young Business People's Conference for Progress, among many others over the years.

I read, and threw out, the political appeals and commercial entreaties before I sat down in my bedroom with the one unopened bit of post in my hand. The postmark on the heavy little envelope was from Mexico City; it had been mailed on October 14, my birthday. As I think back on it I remember a premonition, a conviction that it was from my father. It was. The first communication from my father in twenty-one years.

Though October had been unseasonably mild, the old radiators in my little apartment had woken from their summer slumber one evening early in the month, and had been clicking and rattling ever since, pouring thick, humid heat into the apartment at all hours. My attempts to control the heat at the source were fruitless, and my inquiries to the Greek landlord had similar effects: "The boiler never comes on till November 1," he told me, categorically. "It's never on before November 1," he repeated, his accent thickening as if to protect against any further questions from me. When I told him it *was* on, because my radiators were scalding hot, and invited him to come check for himself, he said, "I'll come look on November 1," and then hung up the phone. We had similar discussions every year around this time, they had become a kind of ritual.

I toured the apartment opening my three windows (one in the kitchen, one in the hallway/livingroom, one in the bedroom) to give the heat somewhere to go, and a channel of cool air traversed my home, in one window and out another.

I sat down at my desk and opened the letter.

"*Dear Oscar,* " it said, of all things. "*Dear Son ...* " and when I read those words,

as my premonition was either invented or confirmed, I stood up, placed the letter carefully on the corner of my desk, and walked to the kitchen.

I had an urge to wash dishes, but there was none to be cleaned. Instead, I wiped the counters, then my old stove, cleaning under the two functioning burners, and then made myself a pot of tea, poured a mug. I opened the cupboards and stared at an almost-full bottle of Irish whiskey I had bought a year ago, but decided to stick with the tea. I went back to my bedroom, poked the letter with my finger, and settled back into my chair. I sat for a few minutes staring before I poked the letter again.

It fell off my desk, landing with a light thwack at my feet.

I leaned over the little piece of paper, and I read it there where it sat on the hardwood floor, tilting my head so I could read the script:

Dear Oscar. Dear Son:

I always wanted to write you a long letter. Now I'm not sure what to write or how to write it. Been a while since I wrote anything to anyone, and it's not like riding a bicycle. I forget how. First, I'm sorry. Sorry for your mother, sorry for you, sorry for this late letter. I always owed you more, sooner, my explanation. I want to come see you in Montreal, but I can't. Sorry. Can you come and meet me? I can't get to Canada, but what about upstate New York? Next couple of months. I'll let you know. Expect another letter. Maybe a phone call. Obviously, I have constraints, but you'll hear from me again. I'd prefer if you didn't mention this letter to anyone (especially Horace. And the police, of course).

PS. How are you?

The letter was not signed, not dated, had no return address. It was neatly-written, with tight precise characters that had long tails, high dots on the i's and long crosses on the t's. My first thought was to bring this letter to a specialist in handwriting analysis, to find out who this man was, what sort of man could send such a letter to a son he had not seen in more than two decades. I wondered what had inspired him to write me now. Though the timing was, somehow, elegant: my father sent the letter on my birthday, twenty-one years after he had disappeared. I should have been angry, but I somehow felt an inexplicable and irrational pleasure at the thoughtfulness of my father for having remembered my birthday. I nudged the letter with my toe, then picked it up off the ground, weighed it in my hand, and read it again.

PS, my father had written, *How are you?*

I read the letter a third time, and I laughed, but my laughter sounded strange to me, and I was not sure where the funny bit was.

When I stopped laughing, I went to find the Yellow Pages, flipped through the book until I found the right section, and started making a list of driving schools.

Sometimes we make sudden decisions, and it seems as though our whole lives have been creeping slowly and logically towards that one epiphany, that one conclusion that snaps all our previous choices--the paths we have taken, the events we have survived--into a coherent whole, a life with meaning, sense, a purpose that defines who we are, where we fit in the world. When I first read the letter, I thought vaguely of trains and busses and taxis and of asking someone to drive me to wherever my father was, but I dismissed all those options outright. I knew immediately that I *needed* to drive to meet

him. In university I had two friends – acquaintances, really, we were in the same Russian History class – who got drunk one spring evening just before exams and found themselves on the roof of a bar. They decided, as drunk young men sometimes do, to jump from one roof to the next. Alex made it; Mark did not. He fell three stories to the ground, and was in a coma for a week. I heard later that during that week Alex returned to the roof to make the jump; to make sure that it could be done; to prove *something* to himself that would relieve some of the pressure of guilt.

In the same way, I decided I would control the automobile that would take me to meet my father: I would learn to drive, I would procure a car, and I would go to my father on the same terms that he had left me.

* * *

One mid-winter afternoon, I must have been 10 or 11, I remember sitting at home in my pyjamas, sick with the flu, feverish. My high temperature coincided with an unseasonably warm spell in the city, and melting snow from the roof dripped down past the windows, hitting the ground below with a sound like intermittent and unrelenting clapping of two hands. I had spread myself out on a blanket in the den, with a tall glass of apple juice at my side; the TV crackled at me and I floated in and out of an uncomfortable slumber. When I was awake I turned the dial among the channels to find the cartoons and syndicated sit-coms that would take me through what in the end was a pleasant respite from a school day.

I awoke from one of my many fitful slumbers to the sound of wailing sirens issuing from the little speaker on the television; a chaotic and bouncing image on the screen showed broken wood and glass everywhere, bodies strewn about, and the insistent, almost hysterical voice of a reporter with a British accent describing a bombing somewhere where the language was not English or French. An ambulance technician, dressed in white coveralls, slipped in a pool of blood and landed on his back, his uniform turning pink; the camera panned out to another man with a big bald head, a rim of grey hair and liver spots, sitting on the ground crying. He wore a white, short-sleeved dress shirt, remarkably pristine, unspattered, and grey flannel pants.

The camera zoomed in, and the man, imploring, raised what remained of his left arm; it had been blown off above the elbow, and he proffered it up to the camera as if displaying irrefutable evidence in a courtroom of the surprising frailty, unimagined, of our bodies, the treachery those limbs are capable of. The severed muscles and tendons looked like spaghetti. And what did the cameraman, who stood just meters away from this weeping human, do? He kept filming.

We are all strangely compelled, I think, by death and destruction, it excites our imaginations, touches an elemental and perverse desire in the human mind for chaos, entropy, dismantling of all that constrains us. There is much talk of the survival instinct, the protective instinct, that instantaneous flash that sends adults tearing into the middle of the street, with no thought of risk, to snatch baby from the path of the hurtling traffic, to spirit the little ones away from danger. But we love destruction as much as life: how else to explain the magnetic draw of a cliff's edge, the strange attraction of gory footage of animals disembowelling each other, the great searing, but unmistakable, aesthetic

pleasure at watching, over and over and over, two massive sky-scrappers collapse upon themselves in an improbable cloud of dust, like frail aluminum cans crushed into patties by a heavy-soled boot.

In grade seven or eight, my class went on a field-trip to a police station. A burly, good natured cop showed us around – the 4x6ft cells, with cream-coloured cinder block walls and yellow bars, just like in the movies; the racks of rifles; the police changing room adorned with topless pinups and dirty coffee mugs; the interrogation room with the one-way mirror, cracked down the middle and patched with duct-tape.

The cop had a high voice for such a big man, a square head shaved on the sides and in the back, and his massive hands looked like two damp sea creatures, hauled ashore. He let us hold his revolver (bullets removed of course) and I remember being astounded by its weight, its menace, the power I felt transferred to my sweating, nervous palm through that hunk of metal; the thing almost vibrated the threat of death, and when I held it, I felt that vibration through my whole body. For a brief moment, I was one with that revolver. The boys around me squinted their eyes like covetous rodents. When I passed it to the next boy I felt exhausted for a moment, and then lightened, as if I had been holding up a heavy block of stone, a tombstone, and had finally been relieved of the duty. I felt weaker, too, less, somehow, and I could see as each boy touched the gun the almost physical growth in their stature, the new maturity and gravity that seemed to descend on each of their faces.

Death is intoxicating; and the thought of causing death fascinating. M. Glasson, our teacher, was a mean-tempered uncharitable man, who smelled of cabbage and sweat, and was afflicted by regular bouts of facial psoriasis that rendered his punishments

increasingly draconian. I wonder if anyone else in my class imagined pointing that gun, loaded, at him and just pulling the trigger?

If I imagined it then, I knew a line was there, bold and clear. I did not take that thought seriously. Most people don't, except for psychopaths, fanatics and soldiers whose wise trainers do everything they can to remove the inconvenient mental block of remorse.

But even among the rest of us, for whom murder is abhorrent, awful images of violence sometimes flash through the mind. Maybe we are curious about the limits of the acceptable, that is all, curious about the limits of knowledge in a way. There are two major markers for us all, birth and death; maybe it is only to be expected that the human mind spend great amounts of time imagining murder and sex, violence and copulation.

It wasn't so much terror of cars that had kept me from driving all those years. It was terror of myself, distrust of what I could do. Having control of an automobile, the murder weapon of choice in my gene pool, had always terrified me. Sometimes we are forced, however, to wrestle with our fears. To grapple with the faith we have in our own strength of character, when we have no choice – no real choice – but to push and push and find out who we are.

In some ways—though I certainly didn't realize it at the time--I had been waiting all my life to learn to drive, to choose a driving school. After so many years, the choice wasn't easy. I devised an intricate selection process: I drafted criteria, conditions, exclusions, weighted values. I made a list of the schools, a matrix of benefits and drawbacks, a

detailed scoring system. I spent days researching, making phone calls, scratching out bits of information and statistics on a thick yellow pad of lined paper, cross-referencing, cataloguing, sorting schools by various benchmarks: location, size and cost; teacher-to-student ratios; age of fleet; pass-fail statistics; accident rates of graduates. Pale post-it notes fluttered on the walls in my bedroom, and pages of analysis of benefits and drawbacks scrawled in different-coloured inks covered the floor. I think I knew even at the time I was just stalling.

I paced the apartment, examined cracks in the paint, counted the slats in the hardwood floor. I stared out my bedroom window for hours, lost in the green and greys of Mount Royal, in the last throes of foliage before the winter, a consoling hump that rose up behind the apartment buildings across the street. I could not sleep. The heaters in my apartment kept blasting great bellows of hot air that hung like a heavy fog in my rooms, even with the windows open. I suffered hazy, half-wakened dreams of seat belts, hubcaps, alternators, and windshield-wiper fluid; the menacing sound of roaring engines filled my ears, screeching tires from the street outside sent me jumping from my bed in a sweat, heart pounding, eyes wide, short of breath.

I came close to a decision once when the tallies of my scoring system pointed to a school called the Alpha Driver Center for Automobile Excellence, but I balked, uneasy with Alpha's monumental resources, its pledge to bring the finest North American driving techniques to all of Canada, the cool sweep of its vision for dominating the automobile instruction market. Alpha was only eleven months old, but they had already been awarded Driving School of the Year, from both the Quebec and Canadian Chambers of Commerce. I imagined Alpha, some great educational franchise owned by Phillip Morris,

or GE or some other monster--headquartered in Connecticut or Illinois with codes of conduct and "Our Pledge to the Client" posted near the front door of a shiny glass building reflecting sky and clouds. I imagined a red-and-blue sign perched in the upper right-hand corner of the building, communicating precision and speed; three tall white flag poles shooting up from the concrete--*American* concrete, the best in the world--representing control, power and, as an afterthought, prudence; manicured shrubbery and the baked-black and sharp yellow lines of the parking lot, tight and mathematical, where a fleet of shining vehicles sat waiting, waiting. I could hear the clipped insistence of the instructor, tall, blond, certain and closely shaved, describing offensive driving techniques and collision avoidance in flat Midwestern, one-syllable words. *Fast. Turn. Clutch.*

I knew I could not learn at Alpha, no matter what my charts said. Still, I called them once, but hung up when I heard the voice at the other end, cold and hard. "ALPHA!" the telephone shouted at me, "ALPHA! What can *we* do for you? Hello! ALPHA here! Hello! ALPHA!"

Seven days into my fevered selection process, I walked home from a long shift in the balmy dampness of a warm October evening, weighing the advantages of SafetyFirst Driving School against the record of Cautious Conduction with ambivalence. Neither choice seemed right; no choice seemed right. I stopped on the corner Parc Avenue and Villeneuve, two blocks from my apartment, and pressed the heels of my hands into my eyes, massaged my temples with my thumb and middle finger. Felt my palms against my cheeks, and studied the ragged posters on the telephone pole in front of me -- a missing cat, an all-organic garage sale, a night of punk and poetry to raise funds for the *Jardin Anarchiste*.

I thought about my shift at work, the heat of the water on my hands, and the slow tick of the minute hand on the kitchen clock, the smashing sound of hot frying pans on the range, and then the image of myself behind the wheel of a car. Jean's insistent voice entered my mind: *the blood, the bone fragments.* I shuddered.

"Excusez," a man said from behind me.

I turned to see a group of three workmen, heavy-faced and morose, wearing bright yellow coveralls, with the city's insignia covering their hearts. "You'll have to step away from the pole," one of the men said, and at first I thought he was joking, so I smiled at him. He motioned me towards him with a bored flick of his beefy hand, and I stepped out of the way as his companions approached the telephone pole.

"Posters," he said by way of explanation, pointing vaguely at the fading collection of hand-drawn and photocopied notices. "Always more posters." He seemed resigned to his fate, his unending struggle against the residents of Montreal and their constant need to communicate with each other through illegal photocopied notes stapled to phone poles. The two other men tore at the posters, crumpled them and tossed them in a nearby garbage can. A gust of wind gathered around us, and a mist of fine rain sprayed down from the trees above; an empty bus, "Hors Service" displayed in the sign above the windshield, hurtled past, and the driver, tired and pale-faced looked out at us from his perch in the empty, fluorescent-lit bus. He leaned both forearms wearily on the great black steering wheel, and kept on driving.

A first layer of posters was ripped off, then a second: the word "DRIVING," written in bold black script on faded blue caught my attention, but the old poster was ripped quickly by professional hands before I could read the rest, then crumpled and

thrown into the garbage can with the others.

The men finished their work and moved onto another pole further down the street. I hovered where I was for a moment, then on some impulse I can't explain, I approached the garbage can, and poked at the balls of paper. "DRIVING," I saw, again, and I lifted the discarded poster. Two white cars with tinted windows raced by, their engines revving like monsters as they tore up Parc Avenue. I unfolded the page, smoothed it on my thighs: "*Stop the Assault on Canadian Driving Instruction!*" said the black text on the washed-out blue page. "*A lecture in defence of the beleaguered Canadian driving instruction system, by Dr. Victor Crowd*y, founder of Friends of the Canadian Driver, and Head Instructor at Auto Vector Institute for Appropriate Driving." A brief screech of tires, further north up Parc Avenue, ripped through the night, and left a throbbing, cold silence in its wake.

I have always paid attention to coincidences. I had chosen the apartment where I lived because a local used bookstore sold me a copy of *The Master and Margherita*, recommended to me earlier that day by a beautiful and charming woman, a stranger, on the metro. Things might not happen for a reason, but they do happen, and when the universe presents two events, two signposts pointing to the same place, I have always thought it best to follow the directions. The poster, crumpled and ripped in two pieces, displayed a grainy photograph of Dr. Victor Crowd, bespectacled, bucktoothed, exuding a look of benign contemplation: the calm and studious face of a balanced educator, a principled man, the face of a man, I thought, who could teach me to drive. I had missed his lecture, but, as if further confirmation were needed, his talk had been given two weeks before, on my twenty-sixth birthday.

I sniffed at the fine air of the evening, more spring-like than autumnal, and made up my mind to visit the Auto Vector Institute for Appropriate Driving where I would, I promised myself, learn to drive.

A big heavy rain drop splashed on my head. The poster-rippers continued their march up Parc Avenue. Another rain drop found its way down my collar, and then another splashed on my head, then several more on the road around me. I started a slow jog towards my apartment. The rain began in earnest, pouring down on me as I ran full-speed, water splashing against my pant-legs, and by the time I reached my apartment I was drenched, dripping wet and chilled.

Finally, at age 26, I had chosen a driving school.

CHAPTER TWO

The Auto Vector Institute for Appropriate Driving was housed in the basement of a four-storey commercial building on a tattered commercial strip, covered in trash, vacant-eyed men, and fast-food shops near the old Montreal Forum. When I telephoned Vector, a kind-voiced young woman had given me a long list complicated of directions: Vector's offices were tucked away in a back hallway of the basement, and she worried, she said, that I might have trouble finding them.

"We've lost more than a few prospective students, Mr. Writh," she told me. "And we'd hate to lose you." I thought I detected a smile through the phone receiver.

I stood for some time in the grimy lobby – which smelled of industrial disinfectant and Indian spices – before I gathered the courage to press the button on the elevator that would carry me down to Vector.

The doors shuddered open, and the elevator bounced under my weight as I entered, the neon lights flickered as the door shut, and the little box, panelled with fake wood, creaked and groaned as it carried me downwards. I closed my eyes, and pictured a convertible driving at high speeds through a windy mountain road in the summer, me at the wheel, wind in my hair, at my side a beautiful ... the box came to a jarring halt, and I opened my eyes. The elevator smelled of something familiar, I couldn't place what, a burning smell of some kind, and I inhaled sharply, with a rumbling panic brewing in my guts. I stepped towards the still-closed doors, and raised my hand to touch the metal. They opened suddenly, before my finger touched, and revealed another hallway with more grime in the corners, illuminated with bright neon lights. I thought for some reason

of the back halls of a mental institution, a maze of padded cells and melancholia, industrial laundry rooms filled with piles of straight jackets, and furnaces firing on piles of dusty coal.

It was a relief after the confined space of the elevator.

At the end of a long passageway I saw a frosted glass door with gold Victorian lettering indicating *The Auto Vector Institute for Appropriate Driving*.

My shoes scraped as I walked the length of the hallway, and my hand trembled visibly as I stretched it towards the door handle. I contemplated the heavy glass door, prepared myself for some kind of measured chaos inside. I placed my hand on the cold metal handle, and pushed.

For some reason I was expecting a flurry of activity, telex machines, walkie-talkies, efficient women in uniforms, a control centre directing a fleet of driving instructors combing the city for students, picking them up at one end of town and navigating them through the underpasses, tunnels and expressways to the other end. I expected square-jawed men in Velcro and Gortex, like a team of Formula 1 drivers rushing about, strapping helmets on their heads and escorting excited teenagers, immigrants, coaxing nervous pimply girls away from worried parents. Instead there was silence underscored by that office-building hum that comes from neon lights and central air-conditioning systems and computer networks.

A receptionist sat behind a desk nibbling her thumbnail and reading. She had slim shoulders, flushed cheeks, and short dark hair cut in a page-boy bob. She looked like a flapper sitting on the beach in a Fitzgerald story, with a basket full of cucumber sandwiches and a flask of gin.

"Yes?" she asked, when I approached her desk, her flapper eyebrows drifting up her forehead.

I tried to smile, took a step forward.

"Can I," I said. She closed the book with grace and elegance, and I looked into her bright brown eyes, touched her desk lightly for support. "Yes," I tried a second time, and coughed. "I'm here for . . ." my throat felt like it was full, stretched to the limit. I collected myself, concentrated, and started again: "I want to sign up for driving lessons." She looked at me. I let out another cough. "If maybe you could let me know. How that works."

She tilted her head a fraction and smiled.

There is a certain dental flaw that has always been irresistible to me in women: the two front teeth are angled backwards ever so slightly, and one or two teeth on either side (the lateral incisors) overlap the front teeth just slightly with a subtle and extraordinarily pleasing crookedness. When such a woman smiles, and a crooked tooth gently pushes against the red of lip, the effect is at once innocence and mischief, openness and a suppressed trace of playful cruelty. I have never been able to ignore the draw of such dental structure. The receptionist had one such crooked tooth, and as she watched me, her smile widened. I could see in the light fine blond hairs on her cheek.

I said: "If you could tell me. What I need to, you know. Do. To learn to drive."

"All right, sir," she said, and stood up, patting her thighs. "That shouldn't be any problem. Not a problem at all. Have you filled out your application forms?"

I shook my head.

"And your entrance essay?"

"My--?"

"Essay," she said, shaking her head with a sly smile. Her ears were too big, but they were endearing somehow, as if they indicated she was a good listener. "Don't worry, it's not a requirement. Suggested but not required. It doesn't matter. Dr. Crowdly likes to know his students' motivations, but I'm sure it won't be a problem." She waited for me to say something, but I couldn't tell if she was joking or serious. "Now," she said, placing her hands flat against the top of the desk. "Let's get those forms filled out."

She motioned me towards the end of her desk, produced a stack of papers and a pen; she sang out instructions, shuffled files, chattered away. I filled in the forms, nodding; we joked, we laughed, I was surprisingly charming; she flirted, almost imperceptibly. There were pages and pages of the stuff, but she directed me through each with the lightness of touch of a patient martial arts master. When the pen I was using ran out of ink, I offered it up to her sheepishly, embarrassed that I had rendered useless this pen that had likely served hundreds before me. She yanked open a drawer, and it seemed to be overflowing with the things, red ones, blue, green, yellow. The supply seemed endless. She presented me with a choice of writing implements, and I picked conservatively (blue, ball-point, Bic), hoping it would take me through to the end of these contracts. It did. I felt I wasn't getting quite enough oxygen. She complimented me on my glasses. We were finished, and I felt as I often did in student days after an exam, a brief flutter of exhilaration, followed by a sudden crash of exhaustion that left me shivering.

"Tuesday night, then?" she said and I nodded.

"Tuesday," I whispered. "Thank you."

"I'll see you Tuesday, Mr. Writh."

"Oscar," I said.

She smiled. "Oscar." The phone rang, but instead of answering, she picked up her book and flipped almost angrily through the pages till she found her spot.

I turned and walked towards the door. The ringing continued.

"If you need anything," she said over the sound of the phone, "you can give us a call. Ask for me," she said. "Ask for Sacha."

I parted my lips and inhaled, as the sensation of a question ran through me. I felt myself blushing. I closed my mouth, and she jabbed a pencil down at her book and began underlining furiously. The phone, finally, stopped. I backed out the door, turned, and suppressed the urge to run as I made my way back to the elevator. I pressed the button, but couldn't wait, and took the stairwell up the two flights, no longer suppressing the urge to run, and then walked in long quick strides through the lobby and out the door into the rain.

I leaned against a no-parking sign on the sidewalk, and felt the fresh air bringing life back to my limbs, as the rain poured down on me. An abandoned shopping cart, with three of four wheels missing, huddled against a building across the street. There was trash everywhere, dirty newspapers, shining wrappers, old orange peels. I looked down at my feet to see a plastic bag, soaked from the rain, floating along the stream of rainwater; the bag swirled at the blocked gutter, and pressed itself against the curb as more trash gathered in the growing puddle of murky water flowing into the sewer.

It was dark out and I walked home in the rain, forcing myself to calm down, concentrating on my steps, the specific action of walking, the process of moving one foot

in front of another. I walked for blocks and blocks like this, my mind focused, clearing so slightly with each careful step, each time I reconnected with the ground. I made my way through the quiet downtown, and then up to Mount Royal Park, and found myself standing under the glowing cross they had built on the mountain to remind citizens of an old institution that once guided the lives of the people below. I looked out at the city, a grid of lighted streets occupied by an army of cars zipping along in some measured order, starting and stopping, turning, all of them going somewhere.

It was beautiful, all this motion, beautiful in a chilling sort of way. I remembered feeling, as a child, the same fascination mingled with horror watching a group of ants drag a beetle to their hive. One of the beetle's six legs twitched, as the rest of the ant colony raced about. There was something that worried me in the way all the other ants swarmed past, unaware, or uninterested in the drama in the midst of their trail. They were busy, these ants, busy with other things, the hectic chores of the hill, the moving of sand, the tending of eggs, the foraging for food. Another beetle on his back wasn't going to distract them.

I stood there under that cross, watching all these people driving somewhere, these men and women who decided, simply, to put a key in the ignition, start their engines, and touch their feet to the gas.

A simple task on the surface, but so much teems below. That engine beats like a manic heart, mixing oxygen and vaporized fuel, sparks and explosions, pistons pumping to spin a crankshaft up to 10,000 times around in a minute, that spinning rod translated through the mystery of differential and u-joints to rubber wheels that bite and hold the pavement and propel an automobile along some vector that, one hopes, the driver intends.

When you drive, not just a car moves, but tens of thousands of parts, each connected in precise ways, jump to life: valves, coolants and lubricants, gasses, electrons, fans, belts; metals, rubber, plastic; heat is created and dissipated; vapours ignited, expanded and contracted; gear teeth, greased, meet and part; a great magnitude of kinetic energy, momentum, mass and velocity is unleashed.

The choice to turn that key starts a universe, and a dangerous one.

I have heard that some people erase memories of their trauma, days and weeks around that history a blank space, empty of detail but still reverberating through their lives. This is supposed to be some form of protection, this elapsed memory, a protection from the terror of reliving, over and over, the pain and horror of those intense hours and seconds, when we discover first hand, for instance, the human body's insufficient ability to absorb impact, our Newtonian weakness in the face of forces often terrifyingly mundane.

Some may lose their memories of trauma, but I have a crystal recollection of the morning my mother died, and I can describe her in minute detail.

I recall her long brown hair, parted straight down the middle, two big tortoise shell barrettes holding her locks back from her round face; she has a smudge of flour on her chin, the fine hairs powdered with white. She is smiling, that morning, her mouth slightly lopsided, her teeth yellowed from smoking; she is young, only twenty-seven, but wrinkles from years of laughter cut into the soft skin around her hazel eyes. A big woollen turtle-neck sweater, cream-coloured, hugs her body, and a bright orange apron decorated with the stylized flowers of the 70s keeps her clean; she wears a silver bracelet on her right wrist, a Haida design, an eagle with a proud salmon clutched in its talons;

and ...

I could go on, but there are never enough details.

As I stood watching my city, caught under the shadow of the glowing cross, studying the lights and movement of the cars, I wanted more, more knowledge, more details from the rest of her life, not just that day, and I pictured the scene in my mind as though somehow I could construct what was gone from all those specific facts, the ones I had, and the intimacy that is created by the right words, words that are attached to an event and a person. These are what we all leave behind, words on the lips of others, pictures in the minds of those who survive us: a favourite brooch, the imprint left by a certain laughter, the way someone ties their shoelaces.

And when those go missing, what are we left with?

I was five years old when my mother died, and though I try to recall the rest of her life (and mine then), the details are almost all gone, except for little random bits of memories and that one, last packet of time.

I pictured my mother's face, imagined her soft voice talking to me as I sat at the table in a little kitchen in the country. I sit beside a big pot-bellied stove, dark black, dangerous and my saviour. On the back wall of the kitchen a mustard-coloured electric oven covered in huge chrome dials and controls, hums like the brains of a space ship in a science-fiction movie. The white linoleum floor sparkles in tandem with the cold snow outside. My mother is cooking in a little yellow cottage with snow on the roof, in the Eastern Townships; a cottage at the end of a long road that comes to a T, at the crest of a big hill, where drivers must choose: left or right. I sit quietly in a wooden chair, examining the red Hot Wheels car they found me clutching afterwards. The apple pies in

the oven fill the kitchen with sweet odours; and my mother says sweet things to me, the sorts of things mothers say to their children, "Do you want a piece of apple, Oscar?" Her hands are covered with flour, and, wiping them on her apron, she sits down beside me with a paring knife and an apple from which she has peeled the skin. I ask her when daddy is coming home. She cuts pieces of the apple and feeds them to me and to herself. She stands, the apple core perched between her thumb and forefinger. "*Plus tard, Oscar,*" she whispers. "*Plus tard.*"

She turns, and walks towards the garbage can that sits under the front window that gives out onto the country road: she looks out the window at the snow, drinking in the beauty of the scene.

My young eyes take in the flash of terror that registers on her face, the sudden silence that wraps around us both.

And this I also remember: she looked over at me just before the big black car ploughed through the kitchen wall and killed her.